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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTE—SURPRISE (CONCLUDING INSTALLMENT.)

IN THE three preceding installments of this discussion the different forms in which surprise may be employed as a tool in the hands of a writer were illustrated. In the September and October numbers, the surprise element as found in fiction was analyzed. In the November issue, the place of surprise in news, informative, and essay writing formed the basis of discussion. In order to round out the subject, it now remains to illustrate ways in which surprise, as an essential attribute, may be employed in other forms of expression.

Students interested in the drama and photodrama should have no difficulty in making application of the principles involved by following intelligently the suggestions laid down in the installments bearing upon fiction. The playwright of either class employs a different technique, but his materials are the same in essence as those of the fiction writer.

Epigrams—Proverbs.

The epigram is literature in miniature. Its purpose is to instill a thought which shall be novel—hence, surprising—to the reader, and to instill that thought by means of a verbal surprise. In the larger number of instances this surprise consists in the association of what are ordinarily classed as incongruous ideas. Thus:

Sweet are the uses of adversity.

When fortune flatters, she does it to betray.

There are few persons with courage enough to admit that they haven't got it.

When we first hear the phrase, it is a surprise to think of adversity being in any way sweet; we are a bit startled at the suggestion that good fortune subjects us to danger of betrayal.

When the epigram or proverb becomes too hackneyed—in other words, ceases to surprise, it becomes a possible basis for another sort of surprise. Thus, a writer in *Life* declares that, in the lexicon of every youngster—

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Sweet are the uses of a jackknife.
 Hunger springs eternal in the human breast.
 Oh, what is so long as a row of beans?
 Do unto others as they have done to your little brother.

The surprise, of course, which makes these lines effective lies in the apt but unexpectedly substituted words.

A cross between the epigram and the short-story—or, sometimes, the essay—is a type of brief sketch now in considerable vogue which depends upon giving a train of thought some sudden reverse twist in the final sentence—a distinct surprise. The following illustration is taken from *Life*:

As a child he was quiet and retired. He was never quarrelsome, and preferred to give in rather than argue. The wiseacres shook their heads. He lacked sand, they said, and had no chance of being anything. He would merely grow up, one of life's failures, one of the many who never do anything worth while. He is buried somewhere in France.

Another example, from B. L. T.'s column in the *Chicago Tribune*:

As, according to the questionnaire, the signer drew \$45 a month wages, yet spent \$1,500 a year on his family, a sleuth was sent out to investigate him. His statement proved to be true. He was a Pullman porter.

Both of these would serve as concrete, perfect models of short-story structure reduced down to cameo size. And their excuse for being—their whole significance—lies in the surprise twist at the conclusion.

Verse.

In poetry, often, the surprise is just what it would be in a piece of prose. For example, in a narrative poem, it lies in the unexpected plot twist in the final lines or stanzas. In a descriptive poem the surprise may be in the unfolding of nature's beauties. Sometimes a poem will have all the attributes of an essay, its surprise occurring in the same channels. Many poems are modeled upon the pattern of an epigram—an instance being the following by Harry Kemp in *Munsey's*:

THE GREAT MIRACLE.

From the first cry of birth to death's slow bell
 Life is one long, continuous miracle;
 And the true man is every day reborn,
 Knowing a fresh creation on each morn.

A poem may be patterned upon the same lines as the brief sketch which has been characterized as a cross between an epigram and a short-story. The surprise element in the following bit of free verse by John H. Clifford scarcely needs to be pointed out:

THE BOOK BUYERS.

Those jokes are ancient now
That once we used to see
In all the papers that we read:
Of the bookseller's clerk who told a customer
Asking for Homer's *Iliad*: "No, we 'aven't that,
But we 'ave 'is Khayyam;" of the seeker
Who wanted Mill on Liberty and ditto on the Floss;
And of the would-be buyer at the country store
Calling for Carlyle's Letters; to whom the saleslady:
"This ain't no post office."
But even yet, in our modernity,
When all supposedly are "up to date,"
One may encounter such intelligence;
For only yesterday, when at a stall I sought
Ramona, the girl behind the books responded:
"No, we have n't that, but here's Romola"—
With speculation in her eyes that seemed to add:
"It's something just as good."

The following classic example—Lessing's paraphrase of a Greek Epigram by Demodicus—might be classed as a brief narrative poem, though, of course, it has all the elements of the epigram. Whatever its classification, the surprise which forms the substance of the last line serves as its whole excuse for being. The example is perhaps superior to Goldsmith's "Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog," in which the animal died apparently of biting a man:

While Fell was reposing himself in the hay,
A reptile concealed bit his leg as he lay;
But, all venom himself, of the wound he made light,
And got well, while the scorpion died of the bite.

Poems, however, may have surprises peculiar to their special forms. Many of the surprise effects are too subtle for analysis—yet they may be felt. It is not unusual for the surprise to consist in a sudden break or change in meter. Arthur Davison Ficke has an "October Song" in Scribner's from which two stanzas may be quoted by way of illustrating this:

The crickets sing
As though summer still were near.
But her retreating footsteps
Afar I hear.

And coming footsteps
Of the solemn fall
That soon shall silence
All.

More often the surprise in poetry is in the crystallized thought. Almost any good poem could be quoted to illustrate this. The examples cited are surely to the point.

Books That Will Stand Rereading.

Sometimes we say of a book or an article that it will stand rereading. Just what do we mean?

We mean—if the thought behind the statement is analyzed—that the book contains such a wealth of surprise possibilities that many of them were not evident on the first reading. A novel of this type may have interested us on first review because of the unexpected twists of the plot. These, being known in advance, upon a second reading, ordinarily fail to thrill us; but we are all the more keenly alive to the masterly character-drawing. The third time, we may take the characterization for granted and revel in hitherto unperceived subtleties of narration and beauties of style. Thus, each time over the book furnishes its series of surprises to make our perusal of it enjoyable.

Naturally, it requires more than ordinary quality of mind, combined with highly developed skill and delicacy, to produce a piece of literature which discloses more, the more it is read. Superficial thinking and hasty, slapdash writing will not produce the result. The secrets of manipulating surprise—of augmenting it and multiplying it—must be well mastered in every branch of his craft by the would-be leader in the art of expression. We might suggest the following as a scale of literary measurement:

Surprise—the raw material employed by the news reporter.

Surprise *plus* surprise—the material of a popular writer.

Surprise *multiplied* by surprise—the material of a great writer.

Surprise raised to the *n*th power—the material of a Shakespeare.

W. E. H.

WHEN STORIES COME BACK

IT IS quite possible to profit by our rejections as much as by stories that sell, especially when the prodigal manuscript brings back with it a personal letter from the editor. A writer whose dabbling in literature has gained for him an enviable collection of editorial regrets, recently turned over a lot for our inspection. A lesson for the aspiring story-writer is to be found in every letter. For example, the following comment from Daniel E. Wheeler, associate editor of the Popular Magazine:

This is not just the sort of yarn we want for the Popular. It is well done, but rather disagreeable in theme. Both of your men fall in a prime essential—they do not get a reader's sympathy. We find among our readers an insistence for a character they can feel themselves take with understanding and excuse. Now your hero could be such a fellow, but somehow he does not measure up to the necessary stature. These are random thoughts without a great deal of reflection, but you will doubtless get my full impression. Try us again.

Who would make the mistake of again creating unlikeable characters after receiving this statement of the case? Another letter referring to a different story, which in part also bears upon the necessity for avoiding disagreeable traits where the hero is concerned comes from the pen of Donald Kennicott, associate editor of the Blue Book:

Your novelette almost got across—but not quite. The desert island yarn has been done so much that only one which seems particularly good arouses much enthusiasm. Moreover the element of fraternal hatred in this story seems to militate against it for our use. Better luck another time.

Mr. Kennicott was rather indefinite in his statement of why the story did not quite "get across," but a letter concerning the same story from Robert H. Davis, editor of Munsey publications, throws light on the matter, and at the same time contains a volume of practical advice in a nutshell:

I am sorry that these island castaway stories are not as attractive as they were three years ago. In this particular island vendetta there is not a single development that a seasoned reader could not guess in advance of its occurrence. It is a simple demonstration of the development of details that could end in no other manner. I know it is a difficult matter to give a novel twist to an ancient situation, but it is necessary nevertheless in order to get by.

Incidentally—what have we been telling readers of The Student-Writer about the necessity for surprising the reader?

Few writers of long experience have missed receiving suggestive and encouraging comments from Mary Botsford Charlton, editor of the People's Home Journal. Here are some typical examples:

There is certainly a good deal of the right kind of suspense in your story. But it is a little too even and monomous as to style to suit our rather exigent readers. We are committed to a spectacular sort of story—one that keeps the reader "on the jump."

The following letter tells still more specifically the kind of story desired by the People's Home Journal:

Your story, * * *, is a little too fanciful for us. I should be only too glad to see more of your work—something more in our line. We would have been glad to accept this story but felt that it was quite too bizarre as to plot for us. We are looking for a good mystery serial—25,000 words—without a murder or capital crime in it. We pay on acceptance. We want a good reasonable plot—no objection to a detective story—with some atmosphere and not too dry and categorical in the telling.

Are you in touch with your fellow writers—their activities, achievements, methods?

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Both stories referred to in these letters from Mrs. Charlton brought other letters similarly phrased. For example, Myra G. Reed, editor of McCall's, wrote concerning the first story:

I read * * * with a good deal of interest, but I have decided against it for McCall's. Although it has all the plot and mystery elements we want in a serial for McCall's, it has not quite enough atmosphere and background for us. In our serials we have to give the reader an impression of a full picture. I shall be very glad, however, to see any other stories you would like to send to me.

And concerning the second Mr. Kennicott of the Blue Book wrote:

I am sorry, but material of the type of * * * does not appeal to us very much, and it is not probable we could use this story even if it were cut down. An extravaganza or a story of the fantastic genre will "get by" if it is short—3,000 or 4,000 words—but I should be afraid to run one of greater length. We hope you will be sending us something else soon.

When Mr. Kennicott drops a line concerning a story it is usually very much to the point, even if brief. For examples, the following, each accompanying a different manuscript:

This isn't as good as most of yours.—D. K.

I don't think this is quite successful—partly because it's too long.—D. K.

If this were cut down about 50 per cent, it would be much improved.—D. K.

Equally terse and suggestive are comments made on various stories by Ray Long, for several years editor of the Red Book, who this month resigns to become editor of the Cosmopolitan:

This isn't as good as most of yours. It's too obvious.

This story has a lot of mighty good material in it, but it doesn't seem to me to be developed as much as its possibilities warrant.

It seems to me that the chief fault of this story is that a young man sufficiently in love with the girl to be disturbed over her refusal

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to marry him most certainly would be able to recognize her even if she wore a mask.

* * *

In the 2750 word story which we received from you on May 9th you have the start of a corking good story of its sort. All the dialogue and by-play which you work in here, is very good indeed. But as the story stands, it is a sketch or an incident, and not a story. I am going to ask you to develop it more, and in some way to sting the stinger before he gets through. I should let the story run about 5,000 words, if I were you. If you do this, I think the chances are that we would be inclined to buy it. At least I know we shall be very much interested in seeing it again in that revised form.

* * *

(Sequel to the above.) You did a very good job in remodeling * * *. We will send you a check the latter part of next week. Also will be mighty glad to see some more stories from you.

Who can say that the rejected stories which brought these letters were failures? Just a few of the random hints to be gained from them may be briefly enumerated:

Make at least one of the chief characters in your story the kind of person that the reader can like and sympathize with.

Avoid desert island and castaway stories unless you have a very striking new idea for one.

Be sure, above all things, that you have a surprise in reserve for the reader—that the plot is not a mere working out of details which could be foreseen in advance.

Atmosphere and sprightliness of style will never injure your chances—particularly with women's magazines.

Avoid the bizarre and the fantastic, especially in long fiction.

Avoid improbable or obvious plot devices.

Keep down the length.

W. E. H.

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